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Returning the Gift (Matthew 16. 24-26)

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The liturgical celebration of the Season of Creation is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Christian calendar. For most of the church's history, I guess, the existence of the world was simply taken as given, taken for granted, a guaranteed backdrop for the human drama. Our tradition has long understood the connection between justice and peace for the earth, and justice and peace for the human family. But it's only with the damage wrought by 'the great modern project'¹ of the last 300 years or so, that our relationship to creation as a whole has come to be treated as a serious theological question – at least in Western Christianity.

What I've been trying to draw out over the last few weeks is that this question of our relationship to creation concerns not just what we must do to limit or reverse its destruction. It's also about how we *imagine* ourselves in relation to the natural world, how we conceive our part in the life of the whole and the habits of being that either block or enable its well-being. We've reflected on themes of having and possessing, belonging and connecting, and the gift of limits. In the final reflection in this series, I want to touch on one more dimension of our being in relation to the natural world. It involves the ancient insight that our human calling is not just to *receive* or even to *respect* the gift of creation, but (in some sense) to return the gift.

But what does this mean? How do we return the gift of life? I've come across two ways of spelling out this insight, both of which I find moving and inspiring. The first comes from the work of English theologian, W.H. Vanstone. Vanstone begins from the basic Scriptural premise that creation is to be imagined or interpreted as a 'work of love', an expression of God's free and loving determination that a world should come to be. On this account, God gives of God's self in the act of creation, as

¹ Rowan Williams, 'Changing the myths we live by' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.175-184, p.175.

an artist pours herself into her work. But Vanstone's daring claim is that there's a sense in which the completion of God's self-giving love is dependent on the response it calls forth. Why? Well, the mutuality and reciprocal enjoyment for which this love yearns can't be achieved without it being returned. Vanstone writes, 'Love is vulnerable in and through the beloved in the sense that ... its completion or frustration' depends on the response it receives.'²

At the level of the natural world, Vanstone sees creation 'responding' to or 'returning' the love of God simply by being and becoming itself.³ But human beings, he suggests, are invited to another level of response which he calls the 'response of recognition'. This response involves the capacity to recognise the gift for what it is, to accept the love the gift expresses. In the absence of this recognition, Vanstone says, God's love 'cannot complete the fullness of its work',⁴ for it cannot complete its self-giving. Think of a parent who loves a child, but the child will not recognize what's being given, will not let it in. Think of the artist who creates an offering, but it's misunderstood or trivialised. The completion of God's creative love 'must wait for the recognition of those who have power to recognise'.⁵

This way of conceiving what's asked of us in response to the gift of creation has strong parallels with ideas developed in Eastern Christianity. In this tradition, as well as a work of love, creation is conceived as 'an act of communication', an address, a *Word* or *logos*, 'that expresses an intelligence and asks for intelligent response'.⁶ Many Eastern Christian writers have emphasized how this picture gives a distinctive vocation to human beings who are given language to speak of God's gift and explicitly to celebrate it. This is one way of interpreting the story early in the book of Genesis in which God is said to bring every animal to Adam 'to see what he would call them' (Gen.2.19). Rowan Williams writes: 'the calling of the human person

² W.H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, first published 1977, new edition 2007), p.52.

³ Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p.81.

⁴ Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p.94.

⁵ Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p.95.

⁶ Williams, 'Changing the myths we live by', p.177.

is to name the world aright: that is, to acknowledge it as God's gift and to work so as to bring to light its character as reflecting God's character, to manifest its true essence'. Thus, this Eastern tradition speaks of the vocation of human beings as essentially 'liturgical' or priestly. Our calling is to recognize, bless and give life's gifts back to God in thanksgiving and praise. The 'final triumph of the love of God', says Vanstone, 'is the celebration of [God's] love within that universe which has received that love'.⁷

And what *I love* about the invitation to see the world and our human vocation in this way is that it suggests the possibility of our sharing consciously in the dynamic of creation itself. We're not just to be passive beneficiaries of gift; and far less to be mindless consumers and exploiters of the gift. Rather, we're called to participate actively in the blessing of life and the increase of love through our own loving recognition of what is given. Williams summarises this vision of things brilliantly: 'The fundamental myth proposed by Christian theology in this tradition is that God's self-forgetting and self-sharing love are what animates every object and structure and situation in the world, and that no response to the world that is not aware of this is either truthful or sustainable'.⁸

So what it might look like to live in accord with this vision? To discover its truthfulness in our experience?

I've spoken of creation as an expression of God's self-giving love. Life emerges as God vulnerably and undefendedly enacts love's meaning in and through the material world, creating space for it to be and become itself, celebrating its richness and diversity without needing to control or manipulate. This is the dynamic at the heart of creation. And it's the dynamic of Jesus' life 'in whom God's self-giving is fully at work'.⁹

Jesus told his disciples: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their

⁷ Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, pp.96-97.

⁸ Williams, 'Changing the myths we live by', pp.178-179.

⁹ Williams, 'Changing the myths we live by', p.179.

life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'. These words have often been interpreted in destructively self-denying or self-repressing ways. But I think that's a mistake. Jesus is not self-repressed or life-denying, but fully self-expressed in pouring out love. When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, to become like him, he teaches that they too must learn to give themselves this way. It's not because he's a kill-joy or because they must suffer before they get the goodies. It's because they're called to share with him in God's work of creating and re-creating life. And we cannot fulfil our vocation to recognise and enable the world's good, unless we give ourselves, unless empty ourselves as he did.

In practice, this is what our daily meditation is about. We practise letting ourselves go, creating space within in which we learn to attend to the independent reality of other beings. Gradually, we become inwardly liberated of fear and possessiveness. As this happens we see more deeply the love that animates the world, and this love moves more freely through us to bless and recreate. And what does this look like?

Vanstone says that human recognition of God's love takes the form of 'celebration'. Authentic celebration expresses understanding and appreciation of the original gift. An artist, for example, recognizes and celebrates the work of another artist by responding to it creatively (elaborating on a theme, referencing an image or scene), and in the process brings a new work of art into being. In the same way, recognizing and celebrating the love of God involves (in Vanstone's words) a 'responsive creativity', 'the forging of an offering'.¹⁰ Perhaps this offering will be something tangible – a work of art or science, a song, a poem, a knitted beanie, an act of service. Perhaps the offering we forge will be more inward – deepening awareness, the attempt to understand, the grateful silence of prayer. But whatever its form, Vanstone says, 'responsive creativity is the coming-to-be of one's own recognition of the blessing conferred by original creativity'.¹¹ It involves seeing the

¹⁰ Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p.96.

¹¹ Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, p.96.

world truly, justly, and letting it speak afresh in new forms and new contexts. It's a returning of the gift and gives glory to God.

It may seem that this work of celebration, this responsive creativity is frivolous in the context of the urgency of our ecological crisis, the dire needs of the earth and her poorest peoples. And of course, it does not substitute for the system and lifestyle changes we know we need to make and advocate for. But I do think it speaks to the fundamental question of our way of being in relation to the world. For if our only response to the current crisis is to make the grudging and pragmatic adjustments necessary for survival, then we will not have grasped the full scale of the transformation needed.

As we said at the very beginning of this Season of Creation: our environmental crisis is in large part connected to 'a crisis of what we understand by our humanity', a forgetting of our 'human calling' and responsibility to the whole.¹² If we don't find ways of remembering who we really are and what we are called to offer in this love saturated world of gift and limit, then we'll continue to career from crisis to crisis, even if we find a way to 'fix' this one. As Jesus put it: 'What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'

¹² Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.200.